A Strategy for Defusing the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

Joel S. Wit

The recent revelation that North Korea has a uranium-enrichment program has triggered a mounting crisis. It has forced the Bush administration to seriously consider its policy on the Korean Peninsula at the worst possible moment—as it is gearing up for a possible conflict in Iraq. And it has placed in serious doubt the continuation of the 1994 U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework. That arrangement not only ended the North’s large-scale plutonium production program, but served as a firm political foundation for the fitful rapprochement between North Korea, the United States, South Korea, and Japan during the past decade.

According to publicly available information, North Korea’s uranium-enrichment program is anywhere from one to three years away from actually producing bomb-making material. Whether North Korea has a workable weapons design is unclear. Perhaps even more important, however, is North Korea’s larger plutonium-production program, which was frozen by the Agreed Framework but may now be restarted. Using fuel rods in storage at the Yongbyon nuclear facility, that program could produce five nuclear weapons’ worth of plutonium in about six months. If North Korea restarted its five-megawatt reactor, it could produce enough plutonium for three more weapons in two years. In that time, it could also finish a partially completed 50-megawatt reactor that was shut down by the Agreed Framework, providing another 10 weapons’ worth of material each year. Once a larger reactor at Taechon is completed, production would grow even further.

The seriousness of the situation is growing. After Pyongyang announced its uranium-enrichment program the United States suspended heavy-fuel oil deliveries provided for under the 1994 agreement. At first, North Korea responded simply by suspending visits by inspectors to plants using the fuel from those deliveries. But North Korea then escalated the crisis by announcing that the freeze on activities at its nuclear facilities had ended and by expelling inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) who were monitoring activities at those sites. The next significant milestone in restarting the nuclear program could come as early as February, when North Korea could begin separating plutonium from the spent fuel rods now in storage.

Faced with this crisis, which is in part of its own making, the Bush administration has been unable to craft an effective response. Such a response would avert a confrontation with North Korea; solve the mounting nuclear problem; maintain solidarity with close allies in the region, particularly South Korea; and build credibility with other key players, such as China and Russia. Formulating and carrying out this kind of strategy will be difficult, particularly for a divided administration in which some are ideologically opposed to engaging a member of the “axis of evil,” but it is not impossible.

N. Korea’s Motivations, Next Moves

Press reports indicate that North Korea’s interest in uranium-enrichment began during the last years of the Clinton administration. In fact, it seems reasonable to assume that North Korea was trying to leave itself options in case the Agreed Framework failed and the security situation on the peninsula took a turn for the worse. This “hedging strategy” may have also included a broad-based research and development effort and further work on weaponization of any unsafeguarded plutonium that Pyongyang possessed.
North Korea’s plutonium-based program started as a serious effort to develop nuclear weapons in the 1960s. But by the late 1980s, after the disintegration of North Korea's closest ally, the Soviet Union, it may have been subordinated to a broader North Korean objective: to ensure regime survival through developing better relations with the United States on terms advantageous to Pyongyang. That was one of North Korea’s goals in negotiating the Agreed Framework, which not only provided the North with fuel and light-water reactors but also called for Washington and Pyongyang to move toward normalizing relations.

Nevertheless, even after the signing of the 1994 Agreed Framework, any serious North Korean decision-maker would want to have options in case the agreement failed and his country’s security was once again threatened. One option would be to restart the nuclear weapons program, coupled with a more advanced missile effort, possibly for use in delivery of weapons of mass destruction. A second option would be to seek a new diplomatic arrangement to ensure regime survival, with the enrichment program as another bargaining chip.

A hedging strategy probably appeared thoroughly justified to Pyongyang. North Korea had concerns from the very beginning that relations with the United States might sour. Those concerns were reflected in the 1994 agreement, structured at Pyongyang’s insistence so that it would not have to give up the plutonium-based nuclear program until near the end of a long process during which the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) would build two new nuclear reactors and provide yearly shipments of heavy-fuel oil. Hedging might also have been part of an internal bargain with elements, such as the North Korean military, that were skeptical of an arms control agreement with the United States. Events through most of the decade seemed to validate these concerns: relations with South Korea remained rocky until the June 2000 North-South summit, the United States seemed distracted by other foreign policy problems, and the construction of the critical KEDO reactors fell far behind schedule.

The Bush administration’s failure during its first year to respond to Pyongyang’s diplomatic feelers combined with Washington’s periodic hostile statements, may have further reinforced the North’s perceived need for a hedging strategy. The North’s claim that the administration’s hostile policy caused it to pursue a uranium-enrichment program are disingenuous. The North was clearly pursuing this program before President George W. Bush took office in 2001. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe the uranium-enrichment program may have accelerated that year. According to the Central Intelligence Agency, North Korea began seeking centrifuge-related materials in large quantities in 2001. Pyongyang also “obtained equipment suitable for use in uranium feed and withdrawal systems.” Therefore, it is possible that Pyongyang made the decision to move from research and development to building a production facility sometime in 2001 as it felt increasingly threatened by the Bush administration’s hostility.

There is certainly precedent for this kind of reaction. In March 1993, Kim Jong Il announced Pyongyang’s intention to withdraw from the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in response to what he viewed as a deteriorating international situation in which Washington was using concerns about North Korea’s nuclear program to isolate his regime. Without this sudden move, Kim may have thought that his continued leadership might have been threatened. The announcement was meant to demonstrate Pyongyang’s toughness and perhaps also to start Pyongyang down the path to becoming a declared nuclear-weapon state. Whether it was also intended to drag the United States to the negotiating table was unclear, but the North did eventually agree to talks. However, Pyongyang was not willing to reach a deal at all costs. If North Korea had calculated that Washington was not serious about discussions, it probably would have withdrawn from the NPT.

Today, Pyongyang may be driven by many of the same motivations. Its response to the recent disclosure of a covert uranium-enrichment program has been designed to make sure Washington understood that North Korea will not be turned into another Iraq—a motivation that has driven its leadership since the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Its bold defiance may also be a first step in an unfolding strategy of trying to negotiate a solution to the current situation—a solution that will avoid a crisis while reinforcing efforts to ensure regime survival. But, if it judges that diplomacy will not work, North Korea may be perfectly willing to build up its nuclear arsenal and then try to return to the negotiating table in a stronger position.
Although its tactics could backfire, North Korea has probably calculated that the risk is acceptable. The obvious danger is that the North’s moves will provoke a harsh reaction from the United States and the international community, threatening its survival, particularly given the North’s continuing economic problems. But for the North Koreans, national security comes first, economic reform and prosperity second. Moreover, they have probably calculated that the reaction will be rhetorically harsh but bearable—at least in the near term. South Korea can be counted on as a voice of moderation as can Russia, whose lukewarm reaction to the current situation stands in contrast to 1993 when it firmly supported the United States. Finally, China’s reaction has been entirely predictable, voicing support for a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula while urging a peaceful solution. Pyongyang probably judges China will not use its political and economic leverage against it if the North plays its cards right.

If the potential danger remains manageable, then the current situation presents Pyongyang with a number of interesting opportunities. Not only can it explore the possibility of reaching a diplomatic solution or going nuclear and then returning to the negotiating table; Pyongyang can also use the current tensions to drive a wedge between Washington and Seoul. That has been a standard North Korean tactic which, while causing periodic tensions between the two allies, has ultimately proven unsuccessful in the past. But the North may calculate that it could prove particularly effective today given the wave of anti-Americanism in South Korea and the Bush administration’s rocky relations with Seoul. Certainly, the emergence of a South Korean effort to “mediate” in the dispute between Washington and Pyongyang is a sign of serious discord between the two allies. Moreover, recent calls by some conservatives in the United States to withdraw U.S. troops from the South in response to this rocky relationship may open new horizons for Pyongyang that it had contemplated only in its wildest dreams.

Exactly where Pyongyang is headed over the next few months remains unclear, perhaps even to the North Koreans. A buildup of the North’s nuclear stockpile may not be preordained, particularly if diplomatic initiatives by other countries gather steam. Pyongyang can certainly be counted on to ratchet up tensions if doing so suits its purposes, even during negotiations. In 1993 and 1994, Pyongyang repeatedly threatened to unload its five-megawatt reactor—a step that would have brought it one step closer to reprocessing—in an attempt to soften up the U.S. negotiating position. Today, North Korea might threaten to reprocess the spent fuel currently in the storage pond.

In the meantime, it seems that Pyongyang may restart its five-megawatt reactor and its reprocessing plant as early as February. Restarting the reprocessing plant is a particularly serious step since it would allow North Korea to reprocess the rods currently in the spent fuel pond. North Korea could begin churning out one bomb’s worth of material one month after restart and five bombs’ worth before early summer. Moreover, any new plutonium that North Korea produces will be spirited away to some unknown location, making a diplomatic end to its nuclear program even more complicated. Pyongyang could use a number of other potential tools to heighten tensions and escalate the crisis as well. Its announced withdrawal from the NPT is the first shoe to drop. Others might include declaring an end to the moratorium on missile flight tests or even conducting missile tests. From a North Korean perspective, the power of these steps will only increase as the United States moves toward war with Iraq.

The Bush Administration

Whatever Pyongyang’s motivations, the Bush administration faces a serious problem. Entering office profoundly skeptical of the Clinton administration’s efforts to engage North Korea, it now must devise a strategy for dealing with a nuclear crisis whose outcome could have profound implications for the international nonproliferation regime and stability in Northeast Asia. Failure to prevent North Korea from building a growing nuclear weapons stockpile would not only be a setback for arms control and American leadership in the region but could also create pressures in countries such as South Korea and Japan to follow suit and start their own nuclear weapons programs.

Although North Korea must shoulder much of the blame for the current situation, the Bush administration is also at fault. During the last year of the Clinton administration, the United States launched an initiative specifically designed to deal with troubling North Korean nuclear activities, including uranium-enrichment and weaponization of plutonium. That initiative consisted of two
A Strategy for Defusing the North Korean Nuclear Crisis
Published on Arms Control Association (https://www.armscontrol.org)

components.

First, Washington engaged Pyongyang in three rounds of “nuclear negotiations” in 2000 to promote greater transparency. The objective was to build on the successful 1999 inspection of the suspected Kumchang-ni nuclear site to establish a more extensive regime for dealing with potential problems. Although U.S. negotiators were distracted by the need to deal with North Korea’s missile program—another priority—the October 2000 joint communiqué issued after Vice Marshal Jo Myong Rok’s visit to Washington emphasized the need for greater nuclear transparency. U.S. officials believed these negotiations, if played out, could have been successful provided the relationship between the two countries had continued to improve. A trip by President Bill Clinton to Pyongyang would have helped to build up leverage that the United States could have used to end North Korea’s nuclear activities.

Second, the Clinton administration wanted to revise the Agreed Framework. The basic plan was to substitute conventional power plants, which could be built sooner, for one of the two light-water reactors to be provided under the arrangement. In return, North Korea would have to speed up the imposition of IAEA full-scope safeguards, the shipment of its spent fuel to another country, and the dismantlement of its graphite-moderated nuclear facilities. The acceleration of the inspections was particularly critical, not only for determining how much plutonium Pyongyang had produced before the 1994 crisis but also for uncovering other nuclear activities. Unfortunately, the proposal ran aground because of opposition from South Korea President Kim Dae-jung’s government.

Upon entering office, the Bush administration—aware of these potential problems with Pyongyang—understandably focused on reviewing U.S. policy toward North Korea. After the review, the administration demanded accelerated IAEA inspections but dropped the effort to substitute conventional power for nuclear power and negotiations on transparency. Despite protestations that it would meet with the North Koreans “anywhere, anytime,” the administration was in such bureaucratic disarray and its ideological objections to dealing with Pyongyang were so strong that Washington did little if anything to get talks started. The disembodied objective of accelerating IAEA inspections fell far short of a concerted and comprehensive effort to prevent a potential nuclear problem.

The Bush administration has only recently begun to come to grips with the current situation. Its initial response—to seek diplomatic support from key regional players and the international community—was easy, predictable, and logical. That was precisely the approach the Clinton administration took in 1993 when Pyongyang announced its intention to withdraw from the NPT. Likewise, the results of these first steps have been predictable. Both South Korea and Japan, while making tough public statements, have told the administration that they prefer a diplomatic solution. The initial Chinese reaction to the current crisis was to resurrect almost the exact same language used after the North Korean action in 1993: Beijing emphasized its interest in a non-nuclear peninsula while advocating a peaceful resolution of the problem. Finally, Russia has also tread a fine line between pressuring Pyongyang and calling on Washington to start a dialogue with the North Koreans.

The Bush administration’s demand that North Korea dismantle its uranium-enrichment program before any dialogue can resume was also predictable. Once again, the administration adopted a position similar to that taken by the United States in 1992-1993 when Washington insisted that North Korea meet its international safeguards obligations before any dialogue between the two countries could take place. This approach reflected a long-standing position taken by Republicans during the Clinton administration that the United States should not “negotiate” with North Korea in response to its bad behavior. The Bush administration also felt that such a tough approach makes perfect sense in the context of an international effort to build pressure on Pyongyang just as it initially did in the case of Iraq.

The problem is that, having “rounded up the usual suspects,” the Bush administration must now decide what to do next. It is hard to escape the conclusion that Washington is in disarray. One camp, consisting chiefly of Secretary of State Colin Powell, seems to favor “talk” but not “negotiation.” Administration hard-liners favor “tailored containment.” That approach would make it easier for Washington to isolate Pyongyang and secure its collapse, but it would also allow North Korea to
produce a growing stockpile of bomb-making material and weapons. That raises some questions: What happens if the North survives isolation or other countries eventually decide they have to live with a nuclear North Korea? Even if it worked, the cure might be worse than the disease for the North’s neighbors—the collapse of North Korea would present a political, economic, and social nightmare. Pundits outside U.S. government have advocated even more outlandish solutions, such as encouraging Japan to acquire nuclear weapons as a means of putting pressure on China or withdrawing U.S. troops from the peninsula unless the South follows our lead.

Complicating matters even further, the United States has to cope with a less favorable international and regional environment than either the first Bush or the Clinton administrations did. First, neither faced the prospect of a simultaneous confrontation in Iraq, which would absorb military and diplomatic resources that might have been brought to bear on the peninsula and in the UN. Second, Northeast Asia is different today than it was a decade ago. North Korea has developed better ties with South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia, making it more difficult for the United States to marshal support for tough measures that, even under the best of circumstances, would be hard to secure. Moreover, the administration has aggravated the situation by fostering the perception, if not the reality, that it has been uninterested in dialogue with Pyongyang—indeed, it has been occasionally provocative.

Perhaps the most obvious, unintended manifestation of the administration’s policy is South Korea’s effort to “mediate” the crisis, a development that would have been inconceivable in the past. Seoul’s overture is the result of many factors, including the administration’s mismanagement of relations with Kim Dae-jung and its failed bet that a more conservative candidate would win the recent South Korean election. But Washington has also proven itself unable to recognize that, no matter what government is in office, Seoul wants the United States to resolve any crisis with Pyongyang diplomatically. The reason is simple: in the event of any conflict, South Korea would suffer enormous destruction. As one U.S. analyst commented during the 1994 crisis, underneath the surface in Seoul, there exists a vast reservoir of potential resentment that the United States will sacrifice South Korean interests for its own. The Bush administration seems to have successfully if inadvertently tapped that reservoir.

The results of the January Trilateral Coordination Group (TCOG) meeting between the United States, Japan, and South Korea offer some hope that U.S. policy is beginning to change in response to this difficult situation. The U.S. decision to talk to North Korea—seemingly without preconditions—is a small step in the right direction. Importantly, this shows that Bush administration policy may not be written in stone and that it could evolve in response to the views of America’s close allies, particularly South Korea. Further evolution is possible if senior decision-makers pay more attention to this increasingly difficult problem; the TCOG meeting might have forced that level of attention. On the other hand, if the administration took this small step because North Korea was distracting it from the situation in Iraq, then the evolution of its North Korea policy may cease if the Iraqi problem is solved.

**Seven Steps to Solve the Crisis**

Given these factors—the escalating crisis, the administration’s ideological rigidity, and the difficult regional and international environment—will it be possible for the United States to devise a strategy for dealing with what may be a burgeoning crisis? Assuming North Korea has not already decided to produce more nuclear material or weapons, it will be difficult, but not impossible.

First, Washington must put itself back in a position where it can use all of the policy tools at its disposal. Talks with North Korea, which may or may not entail giving the North something in return, are one such tool. The administration will have to abandon the notion that negotiations reward North Korea or else find a proxy for engaging Pyongyang. A second tool is tough diplomatic measures, such as economic sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council. The administration seems interested in this track but has undercut its chances of success—until recently—by refusing to pursue dialogue with Pyongyang—a step that would have placated other regional actors. Finally, the administration has ruled out military measures, in part because an attack on North Korea would be too risky, but also because it understands that the current, poor relationship with Seoul rules out such steps. The Clinton administration considered such an attack in 1994 and was, in fact, quietly building up U.S.
forces on the peninsula. Military action should remain an option, if only to convince the North that the United States remains serious.

Diplomacy will be the linchpin that enables Washington to bring all of these tools to bear in the current crisis, but the United States faces three challenges. First, it must stop the slide toward confrontation as both sides slowly suspend the Agreed Framework. Second, it must secure the verifiable dismantlement of North Korea’s uranium-enrichment program. Third, once equilibrium has been restored, the United States must re-establish a process designed to end North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, reduce military tensions on the peninsula, and improve bilateral economic and political relations. This course of action would allow Washington to move beyond the Agreed Framework—not just return it to the status quo ante. If negotiations fail, Washington will have built up diplomatic capital it can draw on to secure support for tough diplomatic steps in the United Nations or perhaps for military measures, such as strengthening U.S. forces in the Pacific or Korea.

To accomplish these goals, the Bush administration should take seven steps:

**Appoint a Korea Czar:** America’s Korea policy is in desperate need of constant, high-level management, not periodic discussions by senior officials who are preoccupied with Iraq. The current disarray is a sure-fire sign that policy is drifting. To correct this situation, the administration should appoint as its Korea czar a prominent American who has political stature, experience, and authority. The czar would forge a strategy for peaceful resolution of the growing crisis with Pyongyang in close cooperation with South Korea, Japan, and other important actors such as China and Russia. The United States has resorted to such a device before, appointing former Secretary of Defense William Perry to a similar job in 1998 in the wake of North Korea’s long-range missile test and the discovery that Pyongyang might have a secret nuclear facility. That crisis was much less urgent than the one we are facing today.

**Freeze the Free Fall:** North Korea and the United States must halt the slow-motion suspension of the Agreed Framework. The United States, South Korea, and Japan should continue work on the light-water reactors while the North pledges not to reprocess the spent fuel rods in the Yongbyon storage pond; not to restart its five-megawatt reactor; and to allow limited inspections of its spent fuel rods to certify they remain in place. This initial step could be taken through an intermediary or through U.S. contacts with North Korean diplomats stationed at the UN.

**Be Prepared to Back Up Rhetoric With Action:** The administration needs to send a clear message that failure to reach agreement will trigger international action. Rhetoric must be backed up with action, including securing the support of other permanent members of the Security Council. Washington should push the Security Council to issue a statement or resolution finding fault with North Korea but calling for peaceful resolution of the matter. This would be seen as a shot across Pyongyang’s bow, warning of possible sanctions to come. Timing will be important; a resolution should precede diplomatic contact with North Korea so as not to disrupt the dialogue and to signal that failure of the talks could trigger tougher action. It may be a while before the administration can raise the possibility of military action with close allies, but building up diplomatic capital over time may make it an option.

**Reassure North Korea:** To restore the diplomatic track, the United States may have to provide Pyongyang with a face-saving device. In addition to its own commitments and public statements, the administration might reaffirm previous U.S. pledges not to use force against North Korea and to respect Pyongyang’s national sovereignty. Such pledges, which echo principles already in the UN Charter, are included in the June 1993 U.S.-North Korea Joint Declaration, issued when North Korea suspended its decision to withdraw from the NPT, and the October 2000 declaration, reached when Vice Marshal Jo visited Washington. The White House or senior administration officials could make this confirmation in an official letter to the North Koreans. A second step, perhaps as negotiations progress on verifiable dismantlement, would be to convene a six-party meeting with the United States, Russia, China, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea to affirm these same principles multilaterally.

**End the Uranium-Enrichment Program:** Dismantling North Korea’s uranium-enrichment program will require talks. From the American perspective, those talks would ideally be conducted by the IAEA,
which may have to implement any agreement on nuclear material, but whether Pyongyang will
agree is unclear since its relations with the IAEA are even worse than they are with Washington.
Moreover, although the United States might use the IAEA to avoid direct negotiations with
Pyongyang, the Bush administration, if past experience is any guide, may not trust the agency to
impose tough enough measures. In any case, North Korea must first freeze construction of any
uranium-related facilities and disclose their location, as well as that of any related equipment. The
United States should try to confirm Pyongyang’s declarations about its program by gathering data
from countries that assisted North Korea’s efforts, such as Pakistan, China, and Russia. But the main
objective will be to secure North Korean agreement to a program of inspections based on previous
experience in dismantling uranium-enrichment programs, such as in South Africa and Iraq. Reaching
agreement and implementing such a program, which is likely to be intrusive, will be difficult and
could be a significant hurdle in resuming rapprochement on the peninsula.

Resume Heavy-Fuel Oil Deliveries: Since KEDO suspended fuel deliveries in response to the
disclosure of North Korea’s uranium-enrichment program, the United States should support their
resumption as it becomes possible to verify that the program is being dismantled. Deliveries could
either be gradually phased in as milestones in the dismantlement program are reached or resumed
all at once after the whole process has been finished.

Negotiate a New Bilateral Agreement: Ideally, once the current crisis is reversed, the administration
should sit down with North Korea to negotiate a broad new arrangement to put the two countries
back on the path toward improved relations. Given the current crisis, the top priority for such an
agreement should be verifying the end of North Korea’s nuclear weapons-related activities through
IAEA inspections, removing North Korea’s spent fuel, and dismantling its plutonium-based programs.
What Washington will have to pledge in return is unclear. Once North Korea becomes a member of
the NPT in good standing, it will be protected by U.S. negative security assurances, further easing
Pyongyang’s concerns. But perhaps the United States might also work with South Korea and Japan to
accelerate energy assistance—for example, by substituting conventional assistance for one of the
KEDO power plants. Both South Korea and Japan could play a further critical role in reinforcing U.S.
efforts by providing assistance through their own bilateral dialogues with the North.

The Bush administration has recently taken a small but positive step in trying to resolve the nuclear
crisis by agreeing to talk with Pyongyang. Hopefully, this process of evolution in U.S. policy will
continue. These seven recommendations provide a reasonable approach that could defuse the
dangerous situation the United States now faces.

Joel S. Wit, a senior fellow in the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and
International Studies, served as the State Department coordinator for the 1994 U.S.-North Korean
Agreed Framework.

Source URL: https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2003-01/features/strategy-defusing-north-korean-
nuclear-crisis